

McRaven, Henry (1949)

The Reverened Joseph Tarkington, born in Davidson County in 1800 and grandfather of the noted American novelist, Booth Tarkington, gives an interesting account of the earthquake in his autobiography, published in 1887. Joseph Tarkington, then eleven years of age, had moved with his parents to Williamson County. He writes that is father had returned from Alabama the day of the earthquakes, December 16, 1811. His father had just built a tall, frame house, and it shook so much that night that his father "called for the children to come down-stairs for fear it would fall. So all came down in spasms of fear, . . ." Some said the house was pushed, and went out to see what had done it.

"They saw nothing--no ropes to pull or poles to push the house with--and came in, and continued to discuss the strange condition of things. It was agreed that nothing should be said about it, as no one would believe what they would tell of the strange commotion. But in the morning, people came from all directions, telling the same story of their houses being badly shook. While discussing the matter, father set out on the table some brandy and water, and asked his frightened neighbors to drink. An old colored woman came up to father and asked 'Massa, did any of you try to shake my house down last night?' Another said, 'I thought the horses were rubbing my cabin down.' One said it was something in the ground; for she felt the ground shake in her yard. Father said every key shook in its lock. Then it shook the water and brandy on the table. On one tasted them. While the gathered neighbors stood by the door in the yard, afraid to go in the house, a distant heavy murmur, like low-down thunder, was heard. All eyes turned to the south-west. The house began shaking. The boughs of a tree in the garden shook, while the air was still. Water in vessels ran over. Some said the end of the world was nigh; others, that it was a sign of war with England. The meetings, directly after, were well attended. Some when who never had gone before. By day and night men sought God.

... "In parts of Tennessee, the chimneys and houses fell. The chimney in father's house, built of stone, two stories high, was split eight or ten feet in the breast. At one meeting, the Rev. Mr. McConico, a Baptist preacher, was preaching, when the cry was made that the house was sinking, and, such was the chronic terror of the people, the whole congregation was in confusion; some running away, shouting, 'He is coming! He is coming!'; some screaming for mercy; some fell out of the gallery of the meeting-house; others lay down groaning and crying. One man tried to get out through a large chink between the logs of the house, but could not turn his foot to get it out, and had to be pulled back. . . ."